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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR EAP/BCLTV AND DRL/IRF, BEIJING POL PASS TO DRL/IRF
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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM KIRF PREL PGOV VM ETMIN HUMANR RELFREE

SUBJECT: NORTHERN PROTESTANT CHURCH HOLDS LONG AWAITED
CONGRESS

REFTEL: A) HANOI 711; B) HANOI 2974

1. (SBU) Summary: The Evangelical Church of Vietnam: North (ECVN) held its first National Congress in 20 years December 1-2. The meeting allowed the Church to name a new leadership board, appoint two new pastors and make progress on rewriting the ECVN's charter. The new leadership indicated that it plans to undertake a number of initiatives, including seeking official recognition for ethnic minority believers in the Northwest Highlands. The Government reportedly did not interfere in votes for the new leadership and has accepted the results of the internal election despite the fact that none of the GVN's candidates was elected. End Summary.

2. (SBU) The ECVN's two-day Congress was held December 1-2 in Hanoi and represented the first time the ECVN had met as a whole in 20 years (Ref. A). (Note: This 20-year delay was initially due to obstruction by the Government, but more recently was because of the ECVN's refusal to hold a congress while the GVN continued to try to influence its leadership. End note.) The new President of the ECVN, who will hold his position for four years, is Reverend Phung Quang Huyen, who leads a church in rural Nam Dinh Province. The Vice President is Pastor Nguyen Gia Huan of Haiphong, with whom the Ambassador met in November (Ref. B). Well-known pastor Au Quang Vinh of the Hanoi congregation is the new General Secretary. Two new pastors were also recognized during the Congress.

3. (SBU) Pastor Vinh (protect) told us December 6 that the GVN gave the Church "a lot of freedom" in electing its new leaders. The GVN had indicated its preferred candidates, but none of these was elected, and the GVN "will accept the results." Vinh noted that Deputy Prime Minister Vu Khoan had invited the new leadership committee to meet with him the day after the Congress adjourned; Pastor Vinh added that the Church appreciated this "sign of respect." The Congress was widely covered in Vietnamese language newspapers, although without editorial comment.

4. (SBU) Setting forth the tasks of the new leadership, Pastor Vinh said that the two highest priorities are to complete the creation of a new charter for the ECVN and to gain official recognition for Protestants in the Northwest Highlands. The charter, approval of which the ECVN had initially set forth as a prerequisite for holding its Congress, is largely finished, but there are "a few remaining issues to work out" with the GVN. The charter will replace a previous version written in 1963, and is "90 percent" modeled on the charter of the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV), which shares the same doctrine as the ECVN and differs only in structure. (Note: Both are affiliated with the Christian and Missionary Alliance. End note.) The new charter specifically states that unification of the two Churches is an objective of the ECVN. Vinh said that there has not yet been any attempt to unify, but acknowledged that GVN opposition to having the more affluent and active southern branch of the Church expand into northern Vietnam was "part of the problem." Another major component of the new charter is that it will allow the ordination of new pastors, no matter where they have studied. This is important to the ECVN because, in the absence of a seminary, many of its younger clergymen have studied abroad.

5. (SBU) Pastor Vinh noted that the ECVN has now issued certificates of affiliation to 934 "groups," encompassing 112,000 faithful from four different ethnic groups in twelve of the mountainous provinces of northern and northwestern Vietnam. "Our big duty is getting the Government to recognize these faithful are believers," said Vinh. He acknowledged the huge number of ethnic minority believers is daunting for the ECVN, which has only fourteen officially recognized churches, and noted that there is some truth to GVN claims that the minority house church leaders have little training and sometimes a limited understanding of doctrine. However, unless the GVN recognizes them as believers first, the Church could not provide the ethnic minorities any training, Vinh stressed,

16. (SBU) Turning to other goals for the new leadership, establishing a Bible school is an "important mission," but the ECVN has not yet applied to the GVN to open one, Vinh said. The board also plans to undertake the renovation of a number of existing churches; to petition Nghe An Province for the return of seized ECVN land and to build a new church on this land; and to seek permission from Thanh Hoa Province to rebuild its dilapidated church there and assign a pastor to that congregation. During the Congress, the Church also established a social affairs committee that will draw up plans for carrying out charitable activities. On the subject of future ECVN expansion, Vinh said that there are groups of believers in a number of locations in northern Vietnam; however, their ability to meet varies depending on local authorities. As in the Northwest Highlands, the ECVN plans to encourage these groups to get permission to gather from the authorities. This would be a first step towards creating an official congregation. That said, the Church is waiting to see how the new Ordinance on Religion will be enacted -- and what the Ordinance's overdue implementation regulations contain -- before beginning this process.

17. (SBU) Comment: The holding of the long-awaited Congress is welcome news, and it should inject a needed dose of vitality into the Church. Furthermore, Pastor Vinh seemed to believe that the ECVN's relationship with the national authorities is now functional, if not warm, and that remaining issues related to the new charter could soon be worked out. Even with this, however, one cannot expect too much too soon from the ECVN. It remains a small organization with very limited resources. Seeing to the renovations of its current churches will likely be the ECVN's most quickly achievable goal, followed perhaps by the creation of a Bible school (the church already runs some unofficial study sessions). The active expansion into the Northwest Highlands that it plans will be an enormous challenge, although we will follow it closely and make sure the GVN is aware of our interest. End Comment.

MARINE